
Middling Stages of the Path to Enlightenment

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Commentary by the Venerable Geshe Doga

Translated by the Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe

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Please sit in a comfortable and relaxed posture—that in itself is a good thing for us to do. We may be advised to attend a meditation session by a doctor, but if we don't know how to meditate, we may as well sit and relax while we learn. The best way to do this is to allow ourselves to be in an atmosphere that puts us at ease, and to let ourselves rest physically and mentally. Relaxing and being comfortable is the most worthwhile approach to take when learning how to meditate.

I regularly mention that each of us have a body and a mind, and an individual self that owns these physical and mental aspects. Body, mind and self are inseparable and always go together. The self, which we relate to as “I” or “me”, has the notions, “I am well” or “I am not well”, or “I like this” or “I don't like that.” The reason we have likes and dislikes, and wish for happiness and not to suffer is because of the sheer fact that there is an “I” or “self”. There is no other reason. The self exists and naturally wants happiness and does not want to experience any kind of misery. Recognising this fact is important because if we look into how we lead our busy lives, we can see that all the activities we engage in can be narrowed down to either securing a sense of happiness or getting rid of suffering.

So, the “I” or “self” has two companions: body and mind. The body and mind are what the “self” uses in trying to achieve the wellbeing and happiness the “I” wishes for. We all have a natural longing to experience external pleasure, but what we really need to strive for is improving our internal happiness. We can do this through investigation and reviewing how we use our body and mind to achieve happiness and avoid suffering. If we examine the ways we use our bodies and minds to satisfy the “self”, we will realise that there are certain things that we need to discard in order to secure and increase our internal happiness. Identifying the conditions that contribute to our unhappiness is essential because then we are best placed to remove them.

As humans, we have the right to experience the full potential of happiness that a human being can have. We also have the human intelligence to cultivate wisdom in order to achieve this happiness. Since there is a level of human happiness, we have the right to experience that, and we are capable of achieving it. Furthermore we need to use our intelligence to cultivate the wisdom of how best to protect the happiness and joy we already have.

As human beings we experience two types of happiness: physical happiness and mental happiness. Conversely, we also experience two types of suffering: physical suffering and mental suffering.

Physical happiness is dependent on good external conditions, such as nourishing food and drinks, adequate shelter and so on. We need these basic resources for our physical survival, which is why I emphasise the importance of education. Without a good education we will not have the means to acquire good external conditions. I often encourage the younger generation particularly to pay attention to their studies because of the direct connection between having a good education and being able to secure good external conditions, which fosters physical happiness.

Mental happiness is more elusive than physical happiness because many people find it hard to define. Mental happiness is also more difficult to obtain than physical happiness and this is often clearly illustrated here in Australia. In this country, we rarely hear of someone dying from a shortage of food, drink or shelter. Thus, it is clear that being deprived of external resources for our physical conditions is not a big problem here. However, people in Australia seem too busy using their skilful means to acquire good external conditions and don't pay much attention to adopting favourable mental conditions. The reason for this is that they lack an understanding of how to create their mental happiness. There are many examples of people who have plenty of external resources and are quite wealthy, but who are not mentally happy. This indicates that their wealth has only sustained their physical body and not brought them mental happiness, which means that they don't seem to know how to acquire mental happiness.

Thus, thinking about the methods of obtaining mental happiness is important. The reality is that the “self” or “I” controls the body and mind. We say “my body” and “my mind” and that in itself connotes that the “self” or “I” governs the body and mind. However, we often find the opposite occurs, particularly that the “self” is controlled and swayed by the mind. To address this situation, we need to first acknowledge that it is our mind that dictates our level of mental happiness, and then take the initiative to put the “self” in control so that the mind is subdued.

Sadly, we are usually under the control of our minds, which in turn are influenced by delusions, such as anger, pride and so on. This is the pitiful situation we are normally in—our minds are dominated and controlled by delusions, and we do not have control of our minds; we just let our minds control us. A person that is controlled by his or her mind is a slave to whatever arises in their mind. This means that when a deluded state of mind like anger arises, the person becomes completely dominated by it and the anger influences the person's speech and actions; the person will get into trouble and make a lot of mistakes. For example, a few years ago, a man killed his mother and when asked why he said, “Because I was angry.” This shows that anger can influence a person to the extent that he or she will kill his or her own mother. On the ultimate level, we cannot blame this person because he was completely controlled by his mind, which in turn was entirely influenced by anger; he had no clarity because his willpower was subjugated by his mind of anger. His action must be punished, of course, but the man is truly an object of our compassion and not an object of our anger. This is because we need to

understand what led him to kill his mother; when we understand that he was influenced by the negative state of mind of anger, we can then feel genuine compassion for him.

We can use our own experience to know how being dominated by the mind of anger feels. If we investigate this state of mind, we will see that it doesn't give us any sense of happiness and only makes us feel uncomfortable and unsettled. In fact, when our tranquil state of mind is disrupted, it is because of a deluded state of mind like anger is manifested. For example, we may be enjoying ourselves one moment but in the next, due to some situation, we may get upset. The moment we feel upset, the earlier moment of feeling relaxed and comfortable is gone. This disturbance is caused by an angry state of mind. This is how we need to contemplate the disadvantages of anger, and see how it is not useful and not something we want to harbour. Instead, we need to make every effort to control our minds and remove these kinds of negative states.

When anger takes over an individual's mind, whatever he or she says or does is completely influenced by that state of mind, so the person has no control. Understanding this gives us a deeper insight as to why we and other people say and do inappropriate things, and make mistakes which are harmful. When we think about how our minds are dominated by delusions, we can develop more patience and understanding towards others because we know that they are not completely in control of themselves. If we do get upset about someone's words or behaviour, we can focus on the delusion the person is going through. The individual person is not really at fault, but rather the fault is the delusions in their mind. This is a more profound understanding and insight.

The main point I am making is the need for all of us to protect our mental happiness by not allowing ourselves to be swayed by anger. If we do this, our minds will not become disturbed, agitated or upset by what arises, and our level of tranquillity and sense of joy will not be affected. If there is a method to overcome the anger that arises in our minds, then applying that method is appropriate because experiencing and being controlled by anger does not give us any happiness. Buddhism has a number of techniques to control the mind, all of which involve meditation.

Our minds will be protected from being swayed by the influence of delusions, like anger, if we apply the meditation technique properly. Meditating will also familiarise our minds to have more positive states, such as genuine love and kindness. So, on the one hand, the meditation technique protects our current mental wellbeing and on the other hand, it familiarises our minds with positive attitudes so that our mental happiness increases. The two main tools used in meditation are mindfulness and introspection.

There are various Buddhist antidotes to overcoming negative states of mind. The antidote to anger is to meditate on and familiarise ourselves with love. If we do get affected by anger and we don't like the experience and want to overcome it, then we need to consider and

think about the reason why we are angry. If we are angry, it is because our genuine love and concern for the other is decreasing – whenever the level of love decreases, anger will arise; and whenever the level of love increases, anger will diminish. So, to overcome anger and angry states of mind, meditating on love and cultivating it is the best method. To get to this stage, we need to think again and again about the disadvantages of anger. If we can clearly see that the experience of anger influences us in negative ways and harms ourselves and others, we will want to conquer this state of mind. We will see that there is no enemy out there to destroy us except the anger in our minds. The real enemy lies within us and we will recognise this by considering what anger does to us personally. When we clearly see the problems anger causes us, we will want to overcome and defeat our inner enemy, which is done by cultivating love. It really is that simple. This is what we need to understand, meditate on and apply in our practice.

Thus, cultivating genuine love is how you promote your inner happiness. Anger is what causes the disturbance and unrest in our minds, but by considering these simple facts, we can resolve to take the initiative to cultivate love and make our minds less familiar with anger. If we do this, then, as soon as anger arises, we will not harbour or feed it, and the love we develop and cultivate will help decrease our anger. The resolve to do this is reached by repeated contemplation on how love naturally prevents anger from infesting the mind. The more we develop love, the more our anger diminishes because love is the best condition for a happy mind; if we maintain a genuine sense of love, our minds cannot be disturbed by anger and our minds will naturally be happy and relaxed. So, love is the best condition for our happiness. We can also say that anger is the best condition for feeling miserable and distressed. Unless we intentionally want to feel miserable, distressed and disturbed, we don't want to experience anger. Instead we will want to overcome and minimise it. This is how we train our minds to become gradually more familiar with cultivating love and not accustomed with negative habits like anger. If we take the initiative to practise and train, the transformation of our minds is inevitable.

So, we need to make the internal resolution that love is our best companion because it is the ultimate way to ensure our mental happiness. Since love is our best companion, we must try to associate with it as much as possible and gain its positive influence. In the same way that we want to associate and spend time with our best friends, we should want to spend time and associate with love, our best internal companion. And similarly, just as we want to avoid friends who have a bad influence on us, or people who make us feel uncomfortable and miserable, we should want to avoid our internal enemy anger, which also makes us uncomfortable and miserable.

To summarise what has been presented so far, the cause of happiness is nothing other than love and the cause of suffering is nothing other than anger. Understanding this is how we can increase our mental happiness because we can then concentrate on cultivating genuine love and concern, and decreasing the anger that arises in our minds.

If we extend our love with a genuine concern and kindness towards others, we will always have good companions. We all like to have good friends so recognising how love contributes to acquiring and maintaining friendships is important. If our friends are shying away, we need to understand that it is because we have failed to extend our genuine concern and love to them. There will be no reason for our friends to shy away otherwise. Compassion, kindness, and love in particular, is what upholds good friendships. Anger does the opposite though because it causes separation from loved ones, and the more the ill-attitude is harboured, the more it distances us from them. The power of love can be seen in the animal world too. Pets, such as dogs and cats, definitely respond to genuine care and concern for them. When owners show their animals genuine love and concern, the animals have no hesitation in giving their owners unconditional affection. There are so many instances of this that it confirms for me the power of real love and kindness.

In relation to my own experience, I can honestly say I don't experience the suffering of loneliness, angst or worry when my companions become distant, and that is because I always ensure that I maintain a sense of love and compassion towards them. It is my real solace and really helps. Regardless of how others treat me, if I maintain a sense of inner loving kindness, my mind is protected. Even if I cannot please everyone, I can maintain my personal sense of joy and happiness. I can confidently share that loving kindness is a very valuable, meaningful, practical and useful attitude because of the results I have had in my meagre practice.

Tonight I have spoken about love being essential to cultivate in your life for your mental happiness. I have also spoken about mental distress being caused by anger, so not harbouring it and trying to overcome it is necessary. These are points I am confident you would have understood because they are not obscure or difficult to follow. So, if you have understood and agree, then now all you need to do is to take these points home with you and put them into practice! *[Everyone laughs.]*

Practising is really up to us. We need to take the initiative to develop and cultivate loving kindness within ourselves. The Buddhist teachings give the analogy of a very ill patient, who seeks a skilled doctor's advice and is prescribed medicine, but instead of taking it, puts his medication beside his pillow and goes to sleep. There is no hope for the patient to get better if he does not take his medication! Where does the fault lie in this case if the patient does not heal? The doctor was skilled, diagnosed the disease accurately and prescribed appropriate medication, so it is not the fault of the doctor. The medication was the right treatment for the disease, so it is not the fault of the medication. The fault can only lie with the patient because he failed to take the medication. This analogy clearly indicates that we need to take the Buddhist teachings' prescribed treatment of generating genuine love and kindness to cure our mental unhappiness.

I have predominantly spoken about the negative state of anger influencing our minds tonight, but there are many

negative states of mind that we need to get rid of and overcome. Buddhism has meditations that counteract all of these negative states. A subdued mind is a happy mind and since we all wish to have mental happiness, we all need to subdue our minds. The best method to subdue our minds is to practise meditation. With that intention and understanding of the purpose of meditation, we can now spend some time meditating.

First, we can readjust ourselves physically again so that we are comfortable. When we are in a relaxed posture, we can check that our minds are settled and calm. The object we will use as a focus for our meditation is our own breath. In order to meditate properly on our breathing pattern, we need to temporarily withdraw our minds from all other thoughts because a focus on anything but our breath will be a distraction. Our minds are used to moving in all kinds of directions, like water gushing and spurting everywhere. So, we need to train our minds to prevent it from moving around in that way and being intrigued by all the inward and outward distractions we have. Focusing on an appropriate object like our breath is a way to contain our minds' activeness. To do this meditation effectively, we need to place 100 per cent of our focus on our personal breath and not focus on anything else. In this way, for the next few minutes, we will engage in the meditation practice *[Pause for single-pointed breathing meditation.]*

That will be sufficient for now. As we have just attempted, it would be worthwhile to try to apply the meditation technique in our daily lives. We will notice for ourselves that meditating, even for a few minutes each day, will relax our minds and brings us a worthwhile sense of joy and happiness.

As well as looking after our mental health, we need to remember to care for our physical body. Our bodies carry out many of the tasks of our minds, so by taking care of our physical health, we can ensure our conditions are optimal and avoid detrimental factors that harm us. Then, if our minds are relaxed and happy, our healthy bodies can carry out positive and good actions, which promote the wellbeing of ourselves and others.

I would like to take this opportunity to show my appreciation and thanks to those of you who have diligently come to these classes throughout the year. I have attempted to present and share with you what I have learnt for myself with the best intention and a good motivation. Only a good motivation and intention to serve and share something beneficial with others is helpful. My intention is not to be well known or to be considered a good speaker, and in no way am I boasting about my knowledge. I don't have much knowledge to show off anyway because my knowledge is very limited, so it would be presumptuous of me to brag! However, I am sharing what I have understood and learnt with a good motivation because I intend the information I give to you to be of benefit. I do get comments from people and I have received letters that tell me what I have said has benefitted them. So if this has been the case for you too, then these sessions have served their purpose.

I'd also like to show my appreciation for and thank Tara Institute. We are able to gather here and use these

premises because it is provided by this Dharma centre. Tara Institute is able to function and provide the conditions we have because of the kindness and support of its members, who make monetary donations and volunteer their time for the centre's upkeep. So, to all of you, I show my appreciation and thanks. You can see how worthwhile it is to make donations because its purpose is to benefit others. All of us here have the nature of being human and one of the remarkable features of human beings is our ability to help and benefit each other. This uniqueness of the human condition provides us with great abilities and the potential to help others on a small or large scale. Acknowledging and utilising the uniqueness of the human mind and intelligence is good for us to do.

I personally have great joy in conducting these classes and presenting the Buddhist teachings to you. The joyful responses I receive from you indicates a mutual connection and exchange, which is noteworthy and something I cherish. This kind of mutual sharing and genuine concern for one another is what I consider to be the main cause of happiness. As I previously emphasised, this joy is a result of loving kindness and the main contributing factor for genuine friendships. So, taking this attitude to heart and cherishing it is worthwhile.

I want to take this opportunity, and on behalf of the Tara Institute, to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. I still haven't received a satisfactory explanation of what "Merry Christmas" really means even though I have been given a number of explanations over the years! [*Laughter.*] Anyway, regardless of whether I understand what "Merry Christmas" truly means, I suppose you understand, even though you have difficulty in expressing to me what it means! [*More laughter as Geshe-la chugs an imaginary drink.*]

Wednesday evening classes will resume on 8 January 2014 and will be jointly led by Alice and Jeremy. They will lead meditation sessions on the Buddhist deities Tara and Chenrezig, the Buddha of compassion. These meditations are available for everyone and would be really worthwhile to experience.

The Monday evening classes will resume on 6 January 2014. For those who would like to come for regular meditation sessions, please come to these. Of course, this hall will be available as a place for you to use all the time. You are very welcome to contact Tara Institute and arrange to come, meditate and spend time here. This is not just a nice, beautiful building, but many have felt the positive effect on their minds by just coming here and sitting quietly. This place definitely has a positive atmosphere and is accessible, so if you want to, you can definitely come.

The December 2013 newsletter states that next Monday will be a heart teaching from me [*Geshe-la laughs*] but that is no longer possible. Venerable Lhamo will substitute for me; she may have much more valuable things to present! Venerable Lhamo will present very well. Many people seem to relate well to a younger presenter. I received a comment some time ago that one of the presenters on Monday evening was a youngish person and that is was

nice and refreshing to have someone young presenting! [*Everyone laughs.*]

Next Wednesday will not be a teaching session, but there will be prayers and practices in relation to the medicine Buddha. This is another incredible practice, so for those who can come, attending will be very meaningful.

On 27 December 2013 there is a prayer ceremony commemorating the passing of the great master Lama Tsong Khapa. Again, this an excellent prayer session for those who can come.

This has all been posted on the internet and sent out by email, but I thought I'd take this opportunity to remind you. Some people have mentioned to me they are intending to come to these prayer and meditation sessions, so that is very good.

Before we conclude the session for this evening, let us again take the opportunity to spend a few minutes in meditation. This time we can use the sound of the mantra to be recited, which is Buddha Shakyamuni's mantra, as an object to focus on. What we are focusing on is the sound as the recitation takes place. We will experience a sense of joy when we focus on the sound and when the recitation subsides, we will feel the residue of that joy in our minds. So, please focus on the mantra for a few minutes and that will suffice as our meditation.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

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